DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 469 248 TM 034 471

AUTHOR	Longley, Charles
TITLE	Law School Admissions, 1985 to 1995: Assessing the Effect of Application Volume. LSAC Research Report Series.
INSTITUTION	Law School Admission Council, Newtown, PA.
REPORT NO	LSAC-RR-97-02
PUB DATE	1998-05-00
NOTE	15p.
PUB TYPE	Numerical/Quantitative Data (110) -- Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Admission (School); *College Applicants; College Entrance Examinations; Enrollment; Higher Education; *Law Schools

ABSTRACT

This study examined the volume of applications filed for full-time admission to American Bar Association (ABA) approved law schools between 1985 and 1995. There were found to be two periods of application flow, one of increase (1985 to 1992) and one of decrease (1992 to 1995). Using descriptive statistics, the study finds institutional rates of acceptance as well as the median grade-point average and Law School Admission Test score for entering classes appear to parallel shifts in the number of applications received. Little significant difference was found with respect to the experience of public and private law schools. (Contains 15 tables and 2 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Law School Admissions, 1985 to 1995
Assessing the Effect of Application Volume

Charles Longley

Law School Admission Council
Research Report 97-02
May 1998

TM034471

A Publication of the Law School Admission Council

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Executive Summary

Two trends in application volume to American Bar Association (ABA)-approved law schools were evidenced between the years 1985 and 1995. The first part of the decade saw a steady rise in applications; the latter part was marked by yearly declines. Institutional rates of acceptance are inversely related to application volume. Thus, for most schools, as the number of applications rises, admission becomes more selective; as interest in obtaining a legal education falls, rates of acceptance rise. Also affected are two generally recognized measures of academic preparedness. As application volume climbs, the undergraduate grade-point average (GPA) and Law School Admission Test (LSAT) score medians of entering classes rise. When the number of candidacies recedes, GPA and LSAT score medians also decline. These findings hold whether the law school is a public or private institution.

Abstract

This paper examines the volume of applications filed for full-time admission to American Bar Association (ABA)-approved law schools between 1985 and 1995. We find there are two periods of application flow, one of increase (1985 to 1992) and one of decline (1992 to 1995). Using descriptive statistics, we find institutional rates of acceptance as well as the median grade-point average (GPA) and Law School Admission Test (LSAT) score for entering classes appear to parallel shifts in the number of applications received. Little significant difference is found with respect to the experience of public and private law schools.

Introduction

While the practice of law is well established in America, the mid-1980s marked the onset of renewed interest in the profession (Abel, 1989). Indeed, a record number of applications for admission to law school were submitted in 1992. Since that time there has been a steady decline in application volume, and legal educators are unsure when or whether the falloff will halt. It seems reasonable to assume that changes in application volume are not without consequence for the operation of law schools. For example, a modified admission profile could trigger institutional responses affecting student (or staff) recruitment and retention, curricular reform, even physical plant operation and maintenance.

This paper examines variations in law school applications for full-time study at American Bar Association (ABA)-approved law schools between the years 1985 to 1995. In particular, we seek to assess the implications of volume change for law school admission, focusing specifically on rates of acceptance and the academic credentials of entering full-time students. Our analysis focuses on two distinct periods: a cycle of application increase from 1985 to 1992, and a cycle of decline from 1992 to 1995. To explore one basic dimension of the diversity that exists among America's law schools, the investigation also differentiates between private and public institutions.

Method

Using simple descriptive statistics we first examine the volume of applications filed for full-time admission to ABA-approved law schools between 1985 and 1995.[1] Our focus is on exploring the amount and direction of nationwide change during the decade. Using grouped frequency distributions, we also look at how that change is spread across ABA-approved law schools, first during a cycle of increased volume (1985 to 1992) and then during a cycle of decreased interest (1992 to 1995). Subsequently, we describe changes in acceptance rates, in undergraduate grade-point averages (GPA), and in Law School Admission Test (LSAT) score medians for first-year classes.

Having detailed changes in application numbers and admission profiles, we then use Pearson product moment coefficients to examine the correlation between change in volume and change in acceptance rates, GPA medians, and LSAT score medians for first-year students. In addition to reporting aggregate results, we subdivide our population into public and private law schools for purposes of comparison. The data used in the study were provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

I would like to acknowledge my appreciation to Rick Morgan, data specialist, for his assistance, and to acknowledge the significant contributions made to this study by Patricia Tipton Longley, Ph.D.

[1]It should be understood that this study encompasses only applicants seeking admission for full-time study at an American Bar Association-approved law school.

Results

Application Volume: 1985 to 1995

The data presented in Table 1 enable us to make several general statements concerning application volume during the decade under study. Overall, there was more than 50% growth in the number of applications filed between 1985 (232,000) and 1995 (362,000). In the early part of the decade there were some 7.2 applications for every seat in the entering class; by the end of the decade that number had increased to 9.8. The expansion occurred among private and public institutions: applications to private schools rose in excess of 80,000, while applications to public schools recorded a gain of nearly 50,000. Thus, we should not overlook the fact that student interest in legal education was higher in 1995 than it was in 1985.

TABLE 1

Annual law school application volume, 1985 to 1995, by school type

		All Schools		Private Schools		Public Schools	
Year	No. of Schools*	No. of Applications	Mean No. of Applications	No. of Applications	Mean No. of Applications	No. of Applications	Mean No. of Applications
1985	173	231,952	1,341	149,934	1,530	82,018	1,094
1986	170	232,770	1,369	148,593	1,564	84,177	1,122
1987	172	248,033	1,442	160,042	1,650	87,991	1,173
1988	173	292,599	1,691	190,026	1,939	102,573	1,368
1989	173	342,888	1,982	211,048	2,256	121,840	1,625
1990	179	383,269	2,215	248,437	2,535	134,832	1,798
1991	178	419,223	2,382	269,754	2,698	149,469	1,967
1992	173	426,173	2,408	273,900	2,712	152,273	2,004
1993	176	397,686	2,260	255,864	2,559	141,822	1,867
1994	176	392,210	2,203	252,826	2,479	139,384	1,834
1995	177	361,726	2,021	233,020	2,262	128,706	1,694

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

* Number of schools reporting application volume data to American Bar Association.

The increase in applications from 1985 to 1995, however, masked two distinct and disparate trends. From 1985 to 1992 the mean number of applications filed with ABA-approved law schools grew each year, while from 1992 to 1995 the mean number of applications declined annually. In the earlier period there was an aggregate application rise of 85%; the latter phase saw a modest decline on the order of 15%. Further, this pattern was evidenced at both private and public schools.

The rate of change was not constant throughout the period. The increase began slowly, accelerated in 1988 and 1989 and then began to taper off in 1990 until growth turned into recession in 1993. But the crucial point is applications to private and public law schools increased in all but one case from 1985 to 1992 and declined every year from 1992 to 1995 without exception. Hence, the former era can be termed an applications *cycle of increase* while the latter span can be termed an applications *cycle of decrease*.[2]

The national growth and contraction in applications are not distributed evenly across all ABA-approved law schools. Indeed, there is considerable variation in individual patterns of increase and decrease; the data presented in Tables 2 and 3 capture the extent to which application change over a cycle differed across schools.[3]

From Table 2 it can be seen that all but one school received more applications in 1992 than in 1985. Thus, the rise of interest in legal education was felt throughout the community. While 17% of the programs enjoyed at least modest gains (up to 500 more applicants), some 21% of the population had an increase of at

[2]In 1986 the aggregate number of applications to private schools declined; however, the number of private schools in our database also declined between 1985 and 1986. As a result, the mean number of applications to private schools increased, thus safely locating 1986 within the cycle of increase.

[3]There are alternative ways to conceptualize and measure change. We could, for example, average annual change across a cycle. However, since we are interested in the range of change over time, we have chosen to use the first and last years of each cycle to measure aggregate application change. Thus, here, application change = applications t_2 - applications t_1, where t_2 = last year of cycle and t_1 = first year of cycle.

least 1,500 applications. Consequently, in the span of seven years there was a mean advance of over 1,400 applications per school. Furthermore, there was a difference in the experience of public and private schools. Public law schools did not see as great an increase in application volume as private sector programs; the mean increase for the former was 929 compared with a mean rise of 1,140 for private schools (Mann Whitney $U = 2651$ $Z = -2.95$ $p < .003$).[4]

TABLE 2

Amount of change in application volume, 1985 to 1992, by school type

Change in Application Volume	All Schools	Private Schools	Public Schools
≤ 0	1 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
1 to 499	29 (17%)	10 (10%)	19 (25%)
500 to 999	62 (36%)	35 (36%)	27 (36%)
1,000 to 1,499	43 (25%)	27 (28%)	16 (21%)
1,500 to 1,999	23 (13%)	17 (18%)	6 (8%)
≥ 2,000	13 (8%)	7 (7%)	6 (8%)
Total	171 (99%)	96 (99%)	75 (99%)

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

TABLE 3

Amount of change in application volume, 1992 to 1995, by school type

Change in Application Volume	All Schools	Private Schools	Public Schools
≤ -1,500, 3 (2%)	2 (2%)	1 (1%)	
-1,499 to -1,000	12 (7%)	9 (9%)	3 (4%)
-999 to -500	42 (24%)	30 (30%)	12 (16%)
-499 to 0	90 (51%)	41 (41%)	49 (64%)
1 to 499	27 (15%)	17 (17%)	10 (13%)
≥ 500	2 (1%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)
Total	176 (100%)	100 (100%)	76 (99%)

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

The period covered by the cycle of decrease is portrayed in Table 3. It may surprise some to note that almost a sixth of the schools (29) actually bucked the ebb tide and reported a larger number of applications in 1995 than in 1992. However, most programs (about 85%) saw their application pools diminish. Indeed, some 57 schools (33%) lost 500 or more applicants. There was a mean decline of 369 applications with private institutions experiencing a greater decrease than public; the means are -310 and -414 for public and private programs respectively (Mann Whitney $U = 3055$ $Z = -2.22$ p .026).

Thus, during the period 1985–1995, it is evident that the nation's ABA-approved law schools, *sui generis*, experienced wide swings in admission interest. Private institutions were particularly affected, rising more during the period of expansion and declining more during the period of contraction. Of course, focusing on the absolute difference in application volume is problematic. For schools accustomed to dealing with large volumes, the addition of a few hundred more applications can be integrated into standard operating procedures. For a smaller program, with limited staff, the same upsurge can result in gridlock. Thus, given the range of institutional resources (and review procedures), it may be more appropriate to use a *relative* measure of application variation to standardize the meaning of change. In other words, it may be more

[4]In cases where there is a notable departure from normality in the distribution of data, the Mann Whitney test is used to determine the significance of the difference between public and private schools. Where distributions are normal, the more powerful t test is used.

informative to conceptualize application variation as percentage shifts; that is, application change = (applications t_2 - applications t_1)/applications t_1, where t_2 = last year of cycle and t_1 = first year of cycle.

The data in Tables 4 and 5 enable us to view the relative changes that occurred between 1985 and 1995. In Table 4, which encompasses the period of expansion, we observe that growth did not take place at the same rate for all schools. While 32 (19%) of the 171 programs expanded their application pool by less than 50%, most schools experienced growth rates of between 50% and 100%. Seventy-four (40%) law schools saw their pools at least double. Thus, if a school processed 2,000 applications in 1985, that same admission office was faced with processing at least 4,000 applications in 1992. Astoundingly, 12 (7%) law schools had to contend with a pool that exploded threefold. Interestingly, there was no statistically significant difference between the patterns for public and private programs; the former grew on average 107% while the latter rose by an average of 98% (Mann Whitney U = 3308 Z = -.90 *p* ns). Thus, while first-year classes at private schools expanded more in absolute numbers, relative to their original size, they increased no more than those at public schools.

TABLE 4

Relative change in application volume, 1985 to 1992, by school type

Relative Change in Application Volume	All Schools	Private Schools	Public Schools
< 50.0%	32 (19%)	21 (22%)	11 (15%)
50.0 to 99.9%	65 (38%)	33 (34%)	32 (43%)
100.0 to 149.9%	44 (26%)	28 (29%)	16 (21%)
150.0 to 199.9%	18 (11%)	6 (6%)	12 (16%)
≥ 200.0%	12 (7%)	8 (8%)	4 (5%)
Total	171 (101%)	96 (99%)	75 (99%)

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

TABLE 5

Relative change in application volume, 1992 to 1995, by school type

Relative Change in Application Volume	All Schools	Private Schools	Public Schools
> 0%	29 (17%)	18 (18%)	11 (15%)
0 to -9.9%	31 (18%)	17 (17%)	14 (187%)
-10 to -19.9%	39 (22%)	19 (19%)	20 (26%)
-20 to -29.9%	54 (31%)	35 (35%)	19 (25%)
≤ -30.0%	23 (13%)	11 (11%)	12 (16%)
Total	176 (101%)	96 (100%)	76 (101%)

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

Table 5 focuses on the period of application decline, and indicates the number of schools that experienced various levels of application change. Once again, it bears mentioning that not all schools confronted a similar deterioration in volume; indeed, 29 (17%) schools actually grew between 1992 and 1995. Thirty-one (18%) schools either incurred no decline or suffered a dip of less than 10%, while 116 (66%) programs confronted diminished volume ranging upwards from the 10% mark. Thus, for the vast majority of ABA-approved law schools, the years 1992 though 1995 were a substantial reversal of the conditions enjoyed during the 1985 to 1992 cycle of increase.[5] As was the case during the era of growth, there is no significant difference between public and private schools in their rates of relative application volume change; both averaged about a 14% decline (Mann Whitney U = 3766 Z = -.10 *p* ns).

Thus far we have explored changes in application volume submitted to ABA-approved law schools in the years 1985 through 1995. We have noted the existence of two distinct periods: growth from 1985 to 1992 and

[5]This may be particularly the case for private institutions. In 1987, the earliest year in this study for which data are available, private law schools had a mean entering class size of 212. In 1995 the class size was calculated to be 229. For public programs the comparable figures are 184 and 183. Thus, private schools were doubly affected: fewer applications and larger entering class.

decline from 1992 to 1995. Further, we have noted that the increases and decreases in application volume were not distributed equally across all programs. While many programs reflected the national trend, some experienced more than their share of increase or decrease, and a few schools encountered patterns that were at odds with the national tendency. Few differences were found to exist between private and public schools. Private schools did expand more than public schools in the period of increased applications and did contract more in the cycle of decline. However, that volatility existed only in absolute numbers; private institutions experienced no more relative growth or decline than public institutions.

Changes in Rates of Acceptance, GPA, and LSAT Score

In Table 6 we report the average rate of acceptances tendered by ABA-approved law schools for the 1985 to 1995 period. The parallel between volume of applications and rate of acceptance is stark. As volume increases, admission becomes more selective; as volume decreases, admission becomes less competitive. For all schools, the average rate of acceptance in 1985 was 54%; seven years later this figure was nearly halved to 28%. Then, as volume eroded, admission rates tended to creep upwards (from 28% in 1992 to 39% in 1995), but they do not return to the levels recorded in 1985. The same pattern persists for both private and public schools, although there are different starting points.

TABLE 6

Mean rate of acceptance, 1985 to 1995, by school type

	Year										
School Type	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
All Schools	0.54	0.53	0.49	0.42	0.36	0.31	0.28	0.28	0.31	0.37	0.37
Private Schools	0.58	0.56	0.52	0.44	0.37	0.32	0.29	0.30	0.33	0.37	0.41
Public Schools	0.49	0.48	0.46	0.41	0.35	0.30	0.26	0.25	0.28	0.30	0.32

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

We noted earlier in discussing change in application volume that aggregate data could obscure intrapopulation variation. The same observation can be made with regard to acceptance rate modification. In Tables 7 and 8, we consider changes in rate of acceptance for the two time periods previously identified, again controlling for school type.

Table 7 examines acceptance rate change during the period of application expansion. In contrast to Table 6, however, these findings are grouped in order to examine the variation that occurred within the aggregate population. As can be seen, 21 (13%) schools decreased their acceptance rate by less than 10 percentage points, 34 (20%) accepted from 10 to 20% fewer applicants in 1992 than in 1985, and so on. What is forcefully revealed, however, is that about two-thirds of all schools became at least 20 percentage points more selective; and almost a fifth of the programs lowered their rate of acceptance by an astonishing 40 percentage points or more! Public and private institutions behaved similarly; among public schools the average acceptance rate decrease was about 25% and for private schools the average drop was about 28% ($t = 1.45$ p ns).

TABLE 7

Change in rate of acceptance, 1985 to 1992, by school type

Acceptance Rate Change	All Schools	Private Schools	Public Schools
< -10.0%	21 (13%)	15 (16%)	6 (8%)
-10 to -19.9%	34 (20%)	13 (14%)	21 (28%)
-20 to -29.9%	40 (23%)	20 (22%)	20 (27%)
-30 to -39.9%	43 (26%)	26 (28%)	17 (23%)
≥ -40.0%	29 (17%)	19 (21%)	10 (14%)
Total	167 (99%)	93 (101%)	74 (100%)

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

TABLE 8

Change in rate of acceptance, 1992 to 1995, by school type

Acceptance Rate Change	All Schools	Private Schools	Public Schools
< 0.0%	18 (10%)	7 (7%)	11 (15%)
0.0 to 9.99%	79 (45%)	42 (42%)	37 (49%)
10.0 to 19.9%	68 (39%)	42 (42%)	26 (34%)
≥ 20.0%	10 (6%)	8 (8%)	2 (3%)
Total	175 (100%)	99 (99%)	76 (101%)

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

Table 8 reveals what happens across the period of reduced application volume. Ten percent of the schools tightened their rate of acceptance. Most schools, however, reacted to the diminished volume by offering admission to a larger share of their pool. For the greatest number of schools (79, 45%) this shift is on the order of less than 10 percentage points. Some 68 (39%) programs, though, added 10 to 20 points to their rate and the jump in admission rates reached or exceeded 20 percentage points for 10 schools. There was a significant difference between the public and private reaction to the downturn. Private schools increased their rate of admission by an average in excess of 10% while public schools increased by a mean of less than 8% ($t = -2.53$ $p = < .05$).[6]

Having established that change in rates of acceptance appears to coincide with changes in application quantity, it is appropriate to ask if there are additional implications associated with change in volume. It seems reasonable, surely, to expect that the academic credentials of entering classes could be affected by the sheer volume of candidacies. We might expect, for example, that undergraduate GPA and LSAT scores would rise coincidentally with selectivity and, *ceteris paribus*, decline when applications fall off. To explore these linkages, we turn now to the data in Table 9.

For all schools there is a meager and generally positive upward trend that results in a 0.1 gain in the mean GPA across the years being examined. The 3.17 mean for 1985 thus, became a mean of 3.26 in 1995. During the increased volume cycle, the 3.17 mean of 1985 became a mean of 3.25 in 1992. However, in the years of volume decline after 1992, the mean GPA for the entering class remained essentially stagnant, varying between a 3.25 and a 3.26. Apparently those responsible for admission were able to maintain their GPA standards regardless of the drop in applications. Indeed, the mean GPA for public schools actually increased between 1992 and 1995 from 3.28 to 3.31.

[6]A comparison of rates of acceptance in benchmark years is instructive. In 1985, for example, only four schools offered admission to less than 20% of their pool. By 1992 this rate of acceptance occurred among 26 programs, only to drop to 10 in 1995. Similarly, in 1985 over 60% of the schools for which data are available offered admission to at least half of their applicants. By 1992 this rate of admits occurred at only one institution. But, with the downturn in applications, about one-sixth of the programs were at the 50% mark. Not withstanding the turmoil in law school admissions that occurred between 1985 and 1995, some may be surprised to learn that admission was in fact more competitive in 1995 than in 1985.

Acceptance rates for ABA-approved law schools: 1985, 1992, and 1995, by school type

Year	Number of Schools	Rate of Acceptance							
		0 to 9.99%	10 to 19.9%	20 to 29.9%	30 to 39.9%	40 to 49.9%	50 to 59.9%	60 to 69.9%	≥ 70%
1985									
All Schools	171	0	4	11	21	26	36	36	34
Private Schools	75	0	1	7	10	20	21	12	6
Public Schools	96	3	3	4	11	6	15	24	28
1992									
All Schools	177	2	24	82	53	15	1	0	0
Private Schools	75	0	17	41	16	1	0	0	0
Public Schools	102	2	7	41	37	14	1	1	1
1995									
All Schools	178	1	10	43	45	51	27	2	0
Private Schools	74	0	7	28	22	13	4	0	0
Public Schools	104	1	3	15	23	38	23	2	0

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

TABLE 9

Academic credentials of entering class, 1985 to 1992, by school type

	All Schools		Private Schools		Public Schools	
Year	GPA	LSAT Score	GPA	LSAT Score	GPA	LSAT Score
1985	3.17	33.27	3.12	32.96	3.21	33.67
1986	3.14	33.33	3.11	33.05	3.19	33.69
1987	3.14	33.42	3.09	33.14	3.20	33.79
1988	3.15	34.24	3.12	34.16	3.20	34.35
1989	3.18	35.24	3.15	35.15	3.22	35.35
1990	3.20	36.37	3.18	36.39	3.24	36.35
1991	3.23	36.90	3.21	39.99	3.27	36.78
1992	3.25	37.01; 158.01	3.22	36.95; 157.58	3.28	37.08; 157.42
1993	3.26	157.21	3.23	157.19	3.29	157.24
1994	3.25	157.90	3.22	158.19	3.29	157.51
1995	3.26	156.19	3.22	156.00	3.31	156.44

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

Note. The figures represent the means of schools' medians. Sufficient data exist in 1992 to report the score from two different versions of the LSAT.

Description of the LSAT is made somewhat convoluted given the two changes in test format that occurred between 1985 and 1995. (Coincidentally, two sets of scores are reported by most law schools in 1992 enabling us to compare "apples with apples" for the 1985 to 1992 period, and "oranges with oranges" for the 1992 to 1995 era.) It is evident that LSAT scores moved upward from 33 in 1985 (when a score of 33 equated to the c. 60th percentile) to 37.01 in 1992 (when 37 equated to the c. 75th percentile).[7] After 1992, when applications began to contract, the average LSAT score drifted downward from a 158.01—about the 77th percentile—to a 156.01—about the 71st percentile. Both private and public schools found it necessary to reduce the median LSAT score to meet their first-year classes.

This is not to say there was not substantial difference in the amount of GPA and LSAT score change experienced at various institutions. In Table 10 we note that not all law schools enjoyed a rise in the GPA between 1985 and 1992; indeed, about a fifth (36) of the programs saw their entering class median GPA drop. For most programs, though, the rise in application volume was accompanied by a rise in the institution's median GPA, and almost a fifth of all schools experienced at least a .2 rise. There is no statistically significant difference between private and public institutions; the former saw an average GPA increase of .10 while the latter had an increase of .07 ($t = 1.69$ p ns).

TABLE 10

Change in median undergraduate grade-point average, 1985 to 1992, by school type

GPA Change	All Schools	Private Schools	Public Schools
< .000	36 (21%)	16 (17%)	20 (27%)
.000 to .099	61 (36%)	31 (33%)	30 (40%)
.100 to .199	44 (26%)	28 (30%)	16 (21%)
≥ .200	27 (16%)	18 (20%)	9 (12%)
Total	169 (99%)	94 (100%)	75 (100%)

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

Similarly, the GPA at all schools was not stagnant from 1992 to 1995, the period of application decrease. As Table 11 indicates, 72 (42%) schools experienced a drop in grades and 26 (15%) schools saw their entering class median GPA actually increase by at least .10. With respect to this measure of academic quality, there is no statistically significant difference between public and private programs. The average GPA remained

[7]There are two different "two digit" tests encompassed within the 1985 to 1992 period. Readers thus are cautioned about drawing exact comparisons.

constant at private schools and actually rose by an average of .03 at public institutions (Mann Whitney U = 3237 Z = -1.34 *p* ns). While some public and private schools did suffer, both types of schools, on average, were able to contain the effects of volume decline.

TABLE 11

Change in median undergraduate grade-point average, 1992 to 1995, by school type

GPA Change	All Schools	Private Schools	Public Schools
< -.100	14 (8%)	10 (10%)	4 (5%)
-.099 to -.001	58 (34%)	33 (34%)	25 (33%)
.000 to .099	75 (43%)	42 (43%)	33 (44%)
≥ .100	26 (15%)	13 (13%)	13 (17%)
Total	173 (99%)	98 (100%)	75 (99%)

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

As was noted for GPA, the LSAT score of the entering class does not experience the same rise during a cycle of increase nor the same decrease during a period of decline at all schools. From Table 12 we note that over 80% (137 of 163) of all schools realized an increase of at least two points in their LSAT score median across the era of increased applications. However, nearly a third of all schools saw their median LSAT score grow by five or more scaled points. At the opposite extreme, 17 schools had a one point rise; 7 reported no change, and 2 incurred a minor LSAT score loss. Private and public programs do not significantly differ in the amount of change reflected in their students' LSAT score performance during this period; the average increase for private schools is 3.64 scaled points while for public programs the rise is 3.24 (Mann Whitney U = 3045 Z = -.74 *p* ns).

TABLE 12

Change in median LSAT score, 1985 to 1992, by school type

LSAT Score Change	All Schools	Private Schools	Public Schools
≤ 1	26 (16%)	15 (16%)	11 (15%)
2	22 (14%)	11 (12%)	11 (15%)
3	39 (24%)	20 (22%)	19 (27%)
4	28 (17%)	16 (17%)	12 (17%)
5	22 (14%)	15 (16%)	7 (10%)
> 5	26 (16%)	15 (16%)	11 (15%)
Total	163 (101%)	92 (99%)	71 (99%)

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

Table 13 explores the change in median LSAT score during the period of application decline. As might be expected, there is a drop in the median LSAT score reported by about two-thirds of all law schools; some 112 schools (67 private and 45 public) experienced a decline. However, 32 (19%) schools had no change between 1992 and 1995, and 26 (15%) programs saw a rise. There again is no statistically significant distinction between the amount of LSAT score change observed for public and private programs; public schools incur an average drop of .88 points while private schools average a decline of 1.33 points (Mann Whitney U = 2968 Z = 1.84 *p* ns).

TABLE 13

Change in median LSAT score, 1992 to 1995, by school type

Scaled Point LSAT Score Change	All Schools	Private Schools	Public Schools
< -3	12 (7%)	9 (9%)	3 (4%)
-3	21 (12%)	13 (13%)	8 (11%)
-2	28 (17%)	19 (20%)	9 (12%)
-1	51 (30%)	26 (27%)	25 (34%)
0	32 (19%)	18 (19%)	14 (19%)
> 0	26 (15%)	12 (12%)	14 (19%)
Total	170 (100%)	97 (99%)	73 (99%)

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.

The Relationship Between Application Volume, Acceptance Rates, GPA, and LSAT Score

Thus far we have restricted our discussion to a description of application flow, acceptance rates, and academic credentials during the years 1985 to 1995. It is clear the central tendency in acceptance rates and academic quality appears to coincide with the central tendency in application flow. As applications increase, acceptance rates seem to fall, and academic credentials appear to improve. As applications decrease, acceptance rates seem to increase, and LSAT scores fall. We now turn to the task of testing whether in fact there is a statistical relationship between application volume and admission practices.

We already have noted that within the law school community there is considerable dispersion around the mean; changes in volume, admissions, and academic criteria vary substantially. Any given school might increase in applications while most are falling, or might experience less decrease than the norm. Similarly, a school might increase the academic credentials of its entering class while most are incurring decreases, or experience less decline than most. Can this variance in levels of change in GPA, LSAT score, and acceptance rates be explained by the variance in change in application flow?

Table 14 presents the data for the period of application expansion and Table 15 deals with the period of application diminution.[8] An examination of the correlation coefficients reported in Table 14 enables us to conclude that the change in application volume between 1985 and 1992 is statistically related to changes in law school selectivity and academic credentials. The strongest observed relationship is between volume and acceptance rates: as volume increased schools did become more restrictive in offering admission (all schools: $r = -.4854$; private schools: $r = -.4128$; public schools: $r = -.6183$). Accompanying this change in selectivity was a significant, but weak, relationship between volume change and change in the median GPA and LSAT score of entering classes. Only one difference emerges when institutional type is controlled; variation in the GPA is found to be significantly related to variation in volume for private, but not public schools (private schools: $r = .2889$ $p < .05$; public schools: $r = .1256$ p ns).[9]

[8]Tables 14 and 15 include both Pearson product moment correlations and Kendall Tau B correlation coefficients. The distribution of data for GPA and LSAT score change does not always meet the assumptions of normality. Hence, if the reader wishes to interpret the data from 1985 to 1995 as a sample, using that sample to make inferences about all possible years, then the Kendall Tau nonparametric coefficients should be used. If, on the other hand, the reader is only concerned with the description of relationships in the 1985 to 1995 period, then the Pearson correlations coefficients are adequate.

[9]Not surprisingly, a moderate (and significant) relationship also is found to exist between selectivity—acceptance rate change—and each academic marker. The pattern of correlation coefficients suggests that change in selectivity is an intervening variable between changes in flow and academic credentials.

TABLE 14

Correlation between relative change in application volume, acceptance rate, and academic credentials, 1985 to 1992, by school type

Dependent Variable	Relative Change in Application Vol. All Schools	Relative Change in Application Vol. Private Schools	Relative Change in Application Vol. Public Schools
Acceptance Rate Change	-.4854**[a] (-.4565**) [b]	-.4128** (-.3503**)	-.6183** (-.4771**)
GPA Change	.1892** (.0758)	.2889** (.1618*)	.1256 (-.0197)
LSAT Score Change	.2560** (.2301**)	.2780** (.2485**)	.2518* (.2295**)

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.
[a] Pearson product moment correlation coefficients. [b] Figures in parentheses are Kendall Tau B correlation coefficients.
*$p < .05$ level. ** $p < .01$ level.

TABLE 15

Correlation between relative change in application volume, acceptance rate, and academic credentials, 1992 to 1995, by school type

Dependent Variables	Relative Change in Application Vol. All Schools	Relative Change in Application Vol. Private Schools	Relative Change in Application Vol. Public Schools
Acceptance Rate Change	-.5627**[a] (-.4164**) [b]	-.4922** (-.3356**)	-.6803** (-.5215**)
GPA Change	.0880 (.0893*)	.1922* (.1567*)	-.0084 (-.0158)
LSAT Score Change	.3690** (.3158**)	.3419** (.3026**)	.4119** (.3513)**

Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Office of the Consultant on Legal Education to the American Bar Association.
[a] Pearson product moment correlation coefficients. [b] Figures in parentheses are Kendall Tau B correlation coefficients.
*$p < .05$ level. ** $p < .01$ level.

Table 15 examines the relationships between applications, selectivity, and academic credentials when the change in volume is downward. Once again we can detect the presence of a moderately strong and significant relationship between change in volume and change in admission rate (all schools $r = -.5627$ $p < .01$). Thus, as volume declined, acceptance rates increased; this finding applies to each institutional type (private schools $r = -.4922$ $p < .01$; public schools $r = -.6803$ $p < .01$). However, while the application volume does have a weak effect on GPA at private schools ($r = .1922$ $p < .05$), it does not seem to influence grades at public schools ($r = -.0084$ p ns). By way of contrast, a change in application volume does affect LSAT scores. As application rates declined, so too did LSAT score medians for entering class; this is the case for private and public programs (private schools $r = .3419$ $p < .01$; public schools $r = .4119$ $p < .01$). It appears that while law schools were able to absorb declining volume, it did not come without some cost.

Discussion and Conclusions

Not withstanding the overall increase in application volume between 1985 and 1995, it is clear there are two eras of volume flow: a period of rise from 1985 to 1992 and a period of decline from 1992 to 1995. Rates of acceptance and academic quality within the law school community as a whole parallel that volume flow. During the period of increased applications, the average annual acceptance rate at law schools fell and the average annual GPA and LSAT scores rose. During the period of decreased applications, the average annual rate of acceptance increased and the average annual GPA and LSAT scores declined.

Of course, the experience at all law schools did not mirror the national trend. However, we found rates of acceptance and academic quality at individual schools tended to vary with volume levels. During the upturn and downturn cycles, changes in rates of acceptance varied with changes in application level. Similarly, the direction of academic quality by and large tracked the direction of application rate. We found a relatively weak relationship between median LSAT scores and change in volume in the 1985 to 1992 growth period and a moderate relationship in the 1992 to 1995 fall-off phase. Our findings on GPA are less robust. A relatively weak tie between change in volume and change in median GPA scores existed among private schools in both eras; none existed for public schools. Thus, in contrast to what might have been expected

(Vestal & Zimmer, 1987), it does not appear that all law schools suffer across the board reverses as applications ebbed.

By and large we found that institutional type seems unrelated to the results experienced. Regardless of what other forces may divide America's ABA-approved law schools, there is not much that divides public and private law institutions when it comes to the impact of variation in application volume. The differences that do emerge, however, suggest that private law schools may be more subject to the ebb and flow of the application market.[10] While GPA changes do follow changes in volume among private schools, that is not consistently the case among public schools.

Law schools are likely to continue to face a daunting recruitment environment. For some schools the challenge may be one of institutional survival. For many more schools, however, the issues posed by application decline relate directly to legal education's professional gatekeeper role. Thus, it becomes important to identify and assess the impact of factors that affect application rates. Given the stakes involved, it is imperative that the legal education community approach its future guided by more than anecdotal evidence.

References

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Vestal, A. D. & Zimmer, B. L. (1987, April). Symposium: Legal education in an era of change: The size and quality of the law school applicant pool: 1982-1986 and beyond, *Duke Law Journal*, 203-239.

[10]Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, presumably more aggressive responses to application decline will occur in the private arena. In this regard, the recent "affiliation" of two private law schools with neighboring public sector institutions is instructive. In the absence of reversing application volume declines, we might also expect to see private institutions assume the lead in reducing the size of entering classes.

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